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ABSTRACT

A 25-item questionnaire on special education decision making was completed by 70 elementary and secondary teachers to examine attitudes about current and preferred participation in planning, programming, and placement processes. Questionnaires touched upon teachers' personal information, class information, the special education referral process, the testing-evaluation process, and the individualized education program (IEP). Among results were that an average of six students per teacher were suspected of having a handicap; the most frequently cited criteria for deciding upon referral were problems in mastering instructional content and deviant behavior; more elementary than secondary teachers indicated awareness of the multidisciplinary team function; only 7% reported participation in IEPs; and 50% indicated they made very few, if any, accommodations for the special needs students. Administrative hindrances to active classroom teacher participation in special education decision making were cited. (CL)

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DISCREPANCY BETWEEN IDEAL AND REALITY: AN OVERVIEW OF REGULAR EDUCATORS PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DECISION MAKING PROCESS

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Abstract

The workshop was a combination presentation of the results of a twenty-five item questionnaire completed by 90 New England elementary and secondary regular educators and a group generated discussion of what can be done to improve their school's implementation of the IEP process. The presentation and discussion centered around regular educators preferred participation in the referral, planning, programming, placement and evaluation procedures for potential and designated special education students. The presentation stressed that, as budgets become tighter and the responsibilities of regular teachers in regards to the mainstreaming process of special education students increases, the realities of classroom accommodations and the expertise of regular educators needs to become an integral part of the multidisciplinary team decision making process.

DISCREPANCY BETWEEN THE IDEAL AND REALITY: AN OVERVIEW OF REGULAR EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR ROLE IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DECISION MAKING PROCESS

Introduction

Special education is defined as "specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a handicapped child" (Federal Regulations, 1977). While sometimes considered synonymous with a student's special education placement, specially designed instruction must include sequenced instructional content and instructional methods which are responsive to each student's unique needs. Unique needs and specially designed instruction are initially identified within the special education referral, planning and placement process.

Dominant policy themes within this process include: due process - procedural safeguards, protection in the evaluation process (PEP), the individualized education program (IEP) and placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Due process requires informed parental consent to proposed changes in the identification, evaluation or educational placement of their child. PEP requires the use of pluralistic assessment practices directed toward minimizing discrimnatory actions. Collaborativly developed by parents, teachers and administrators, the IEP orchestrates unique needs, specially designed instruction, and service delivery. The LRE is that individually determined educational setting in which the

benefits of both specially designed instruction and incidental learning through interaction with "normal" students may be experienced.

Implementation of these policy themes depends upon policy interpretation, the structure of the school, the implementation strategies employed, and macrosociopolitical factors. Operationally, placement in the least restrictive environment has become retention in the regular class -- commonly known as mainstreaming. While "mainstreaming" has many connotations, Kaufman and his colleagues (1975) have provided a frequently cited definition.

> Mainstreaming refers to the temporal, instructional and social integration of eligible exceptional children with normal peers based on an ongoing, individually determined, educational planning and programming process and requires clarification of responsibility among regular and special education administrative, instructional, and supportive personnel (p.4).

This definition includes three requisites for mainstreaming: (1) temporal, social, and instructional integration; (2) ongoing educational planning and programming; and (3) clarification of responsibility among general and special educators. For Turnbull and Turnbull (1979) mainstreaming "promotes the concept that curriculum adaptations and instructional strategies tailored to the

needs of exceptional children can occur in regular classrooms..." (p. 140).

Temporal integration is easily accomplished through administrative action. However, educational planning, programming and clarification of responsibility among general and special educators are also essential to instructional and social integration. Johnson and Johnson (1980) identify the necessity for general and special educators "to work together as a team to facilitate cooperative (social) interactions between handicapped and nonhandicapped students" (p. 97). Clarification of educational goals and objectives, modification of instructional practices, and coordinated efforts between general and special educators evolve "from regularly scheduled meetings in which teachers discuss materials, methods that have been appropriate for the child, and, in general, the level of progress in the regular classroom" (Jones, Gottlieb, Guskin, & Yoshida, 1978, p. 594).

Regularly scheduled meetings directed toward educational planning, programming, and clarification of responsibility are held within the special education referral, planning, and placement process. In these meetings, referrals to special education are reviewed, decisions about the nature and extent of student evaluations and eligibility decisions are made, and individualized education programs are developed. For students new to

special education, a planning mechanism in which both general and special educators may participate is available. Meetings at which a student's assessment results are reviewed and meetings in which an IEP is developed provide unique opportunities for initial planning, programming and clarification of instructional responsibilities. For "mainstreaming" to approximate the promise of its definition, general and special educators must meaningfully participate in these meetings. This study investigated the general educator's role within the special education referral, planning, and placement process.

Method

As part of a project to increase the utility of the individualized education program, a twenty-five item open ended questionnaire was sent to a randomly selected sample of ninety general educators in three New England school districts. Questions were clustered into five areas: 1) personal information, 2) class information, 3) the special education referral process, 4) the testing-evaluation process, and 5) the individualized education program. The questions were designed to elicit information related to current participation and preferred participation in the planning, programming and placement processses. Questionnaires were completed and returned by seventy-eight percent (78%) of the sampled teachers (70/90); eighty-two percent (82%) of the elementary teachers (37/45) and

seventy-three percent (73%) of the secondary teachers responded (33/45). Responses to questions were listed, classified and tabulated.

Results

Personal and Class Information: All responding teachers were certified for their current positions, reported graduate work beyond the baccalaureate degree, and averaged eleven years of teaching experience. Twenty-two teachers reported no course work in special education (E=8, S=14); forty-eight teachers averaged 3.4 course credits in special education.

Average class size was twenty-four students. An average of six students per teacher (E=4.27, S=8.24) were suspected of experiencing a handicapping condition. On the average, elementary teachers referred two students and secondary teachers referred one student for special education consideration.

Special Education Referral Process: Prior to referring a student, elementary teachers most frequently solicited assistance from the resource teacher (43% of the teachers) and/or the principal (38%). Secondary teachers most frequently solicited assistance from guidance counselors (52%) and/or the resource teacher (21%). These teachers used many criteria in deciding to refer a student. The most frequently employed decision criteria included problems in (a) mastering instructional content (60%) and/or (b) deviant

behavior (57%). Content mastery criteria were reflected in statements like "inability to keep up" and "functioning in the classroom". Deviant behavior criteria were reflected in statements like "poor peer relations", "uncontrollable", and "inappropriate social skills". Elementary teachers (68%) referred students fo deviant behavior more frequently than did secondary teachers (46%).

Before initiating a referral for special education, teachers reported using a variety of intervention strategies. In descending order of frequency, teachers reported: a) individualizing lessons (59%), b) holding parent conferences (30%), c) soliciting assistance of other staff (27%), d) simplifying either the learning task or criteria for success (23%), and e) discussing the problem with the student (21%). Elementary teachers were most likely to individualize lessons (76%); secondary teachers were most likely to solicit assistance from other staff (39%) and discuss problems with the student (33%).

When completing referral forms, teachers indicated that they: a) provided descriptions of student performance (70%), b) observed instances of inappropriate behavior (51%), and c) included work samples which represented the student's performance in class (41%).

<u>The Testing - Evaluation Process:</u> Upon receipt and review of referrals, a Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) identifies the evaluation focus, evaluation instruments,

procedures and personnel to be implimented in the initial assessment process. A student's eligibility for special education, unique needs and specially designed instruction are all based upon the evaluation results. Nearly all student referred by teachers remain in their classrooms for most of the school day. Informed participation of general educators in decisions of the MDT appears essential to integration of mildly handicapped students into regular classes.

Fifty percent (50%) of these teachers indicated awareness of the MDT's referral review process. A majority of the elementary teachers reported some knowledge of team assessment procedures (57%) and placement decisions 70%); fewer secondary teachers indicated awareness of assessment procedures (24%) and placement decisions (18%). The responses of both the elementary and secondary teachers indicated poor awareness of how eligibility decisions (16%) and istructional decisions (11%) were made.

For most teachers, completion of the written referral form signified termination of involvement in the special education referral, planning and placement process. Attendance at and passsive participation in MDT meetings was reported by fourteen percent of the teachers. Attendance at and active participation in meetings was reported by twenty-one percent of the teachers. Elementary teachers (46%) participated in MDT meetings with greater frequency

than their secondary counterparts (21%). Fifty-nine percent (59%) of the teachers reported that they do not attend meetings of the MDT. Four percent (4%) of the teachers did not respond to this question.

Preference for increased participation in meetings of the Multidisciplinary Team was expressed by fifty-two percent of these teachers (E=23, S=13). Of this number, nineteen percent of the teachers want to discuss the student in relation to curricula demands and/or course requirements (E=7, S=6). Sixteen percent of the teachers either liked their current role or were not sure how their role should be changed (E=2, S=7). One third of the teachers indicated a preference for no role in MDT meetings (E=12, S=11).

Developing the Individualized Education Program:

Parents, teachers and an administrator are required participants in IEP meetings. Such tripartite participation is intended to enable orchestration of unique needs for the student, specially designed instructional strategies, and delivery of services. Despite the ideal, the teachers indicated a low rate of participation in IEP meetings.

Seven percent of these classroom teachers reported participation in developing IEPs (E=4, S=1); six percent of the teachers reported regular attendance at IEP meetings (E=4, S=1). Eleven percent of the teachers either did not respond to this item or identified it as not applicable to them (E=1, S=7). Twenty-seven percent of the teachers

reported minimal participation in developing IEPs (E=5, S=4). And forty-seven percent of these teachers reported no participation in IEP development (E=13, S=21).

Preferences for increased participation in IEP meetings were indicated by forty-six percent of the teaches (E=20, S=12). Constantly providing members of the IEP team with awareness of students' specific problems in relation to curriculum demands was the role consistently identified. Nineteen percent of the teachers indicated a minimal role in developing the IEP (E=5, S=8); however, eight of these thirteen teachers (73%) wanted the assistance of the IEP team members in identifying and working toward objectives related to unique needs of handicapped students in their classes. Thirty-one percent (E=12, S=10) of the respondents provided no indication of a preferred role in the IEP meetings.

Sharing instructional responsibilities requires regular interaction among general and special educators. Twenty-four percent of these teachers indicated an absence of shared instructional responsibilities. Thirty percent of the teachers reported minimal interaction among teachers which usually occurred at grading time. Finally, one third of these teachers reported effective communication and shared instructional responsibilities between themselves and special educators.

Description of classroom accommodations made by general

educators roughly parellels the extent to which instructional responsibilities are shared. Eleven percent of these teachers indicated no awareness of special needs students who required classroom accommodations: nineteen percent of these teachers did not respond to this question. Fifty percent of these teachers reported making very few, if any, classroom accommodations. And twenty percent of these teachers identified specific accommodations made for mildly handicapped students in their classes. In descending order of frequency, the following classroom acccommodations were reported: 1) socially including the student in class activities, 2) individualizing lessons, 3) modifying the lesson and/or material, 4) building the child's confidence level and coping skills, 5) moving the child's seat, 6) peer matching for lessons, 7) extending deadlines so that the resource teacher can help the student, and 8) lowering the standards and/or less work.

Discussion

Integration of mildly handicapped students requires interaction among general and special educators within an ongoing planning and programming process. Unique opportunities to jointly identify students' needs, cooperatively design instrucional programs and collaboratively identify educational placements are hypothetically available through Multidisciplinary Team and IEP meetings. Teachers' knowledge of actions taken and

preference for participation in these meetings greatly exceed their actual levels of participation. If these planning and programming opportunities continue to be underutilized, retention of mildly handicapped students in regular classes may not be placement in their least restrictive environments.

Organizational structures in schools neither enable nor encourage participatory planning and programming. Increased participation of general educators requires clarification of administrative responsibilities and explicit organizational mechanisms to enable participation.

Parellel administrative structures in special and general education currently exist. These administrative structures contribute to confusion about who should manage school based special education processes and programs. Principals report limited special education expertise and often defer to itinerant MDT members (Dickson & Moore, 1980). Special education administrators are often unable to continuously influence instruction in regular classrooms. Principals and special education administrators must clarify responsibilities for school based programs and processes. Because of varying levels of expertise, interests, and orientations, clarification should occur on an individual basis.

Explicit administrative mechanisms which enable and encourage participatory planning and programming are

required. In elementary schools, teachers' schedules and meeting schedules must be coordinated. Multidisciplinary Team meetings should be scheduled at a designated times thoughout the year. Then teachers' schedules can be flexed to accommodate participation in as many IEP meetings as possible (Dickson & Moore, 1980). At the secondary level, teachers who express the greatest concern and/or those whose teaching most directly affects student performance can be scheduled to participate in the IEP process. These teachers may be designated as disseminators of information to other teachers. Dissemination of instructionally relevant infomation can become a major responsibility of case managers in secondary schools. Reviews of student performance in relation to goals and objectives may be conducted in meetings held between student dismissal and teacher release times at the end of the school day.

Impediments to active and meaningful teacher participation are not all logistical. However, failure to resolve logistical problems exacerbates attitudinal and expertise problems related to mainstreaming. Solutions to logistical problems must be sought by local professionals interested in maximizing the impact of specially designed instruction in both general and special educational situations.

Meyen and Lehr (1981) advance the premise that mildly handicapped students require intensive instruction.

Moreover, "many of the required conditions (for intensive instruction) are curently not likely to exist in the typical regular classroom setting and by their omission the regular class becomes highly restrictive" rather than less restrictive (p. 2). A recent meta-analysis of efficacy studies on self-contained special education classes concluded that no justification could be found for placement of low intelligence students in special classes. "Some justification in the form of positive gain in academic and social variables was found for special class placement of learning disabled and behavior disordered children" (Meyen & Lehr, p. 2).

Increasingly, opinion and evidence indicates that retention in regular classes through "mainstreaming" may not be the least restrictive environment for mildly handicapped students. Teachers want to teach more effectively. They view participation in the MDT and IEP meetings as contributing to improved educational opportunity for all their students. The absence of enabling mechanisms are hindering the realization of effective mainstreaming. As a result, good intending and well informed regular educators are being denied the vehicles necessary to succeed.

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